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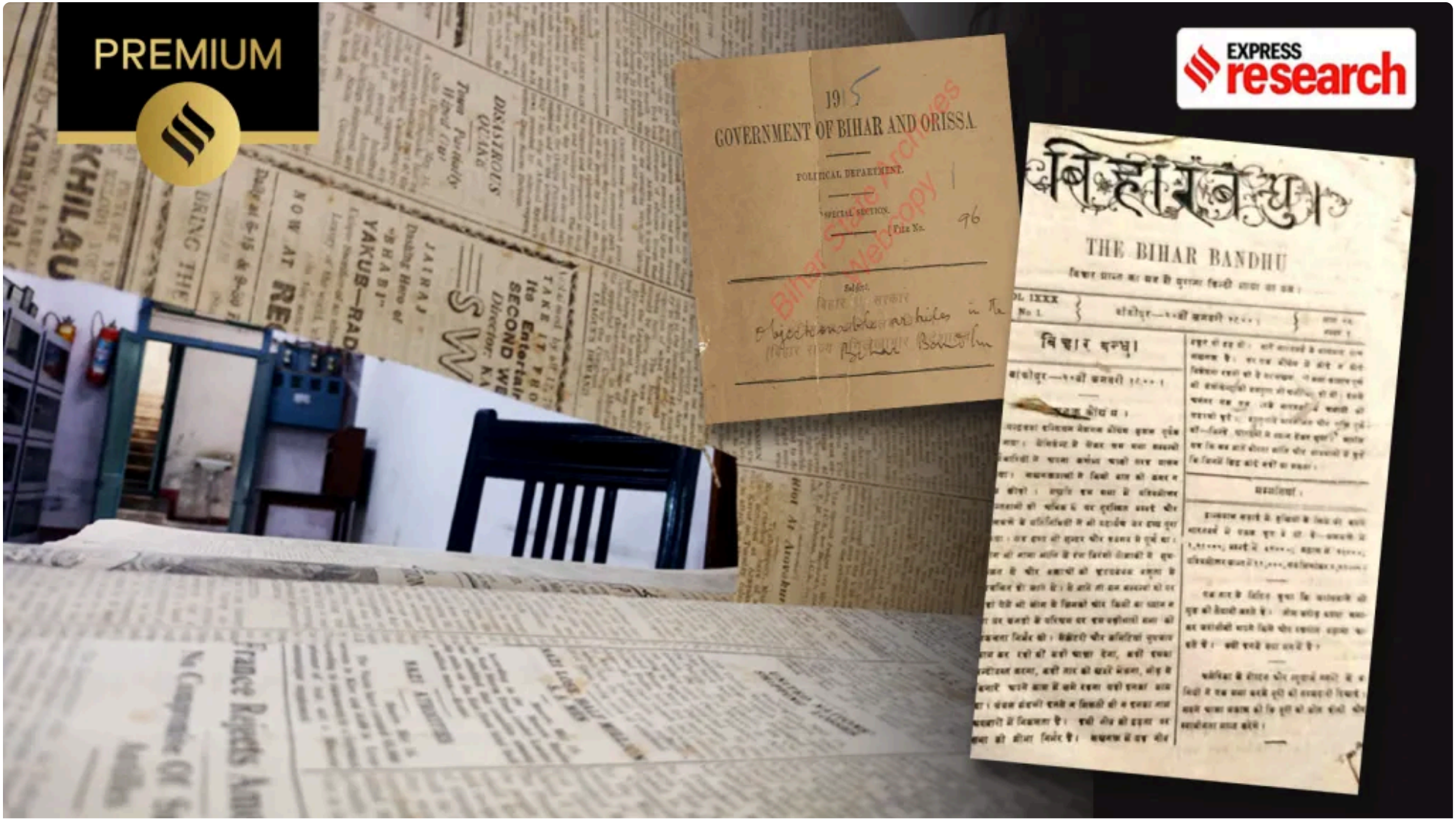
Bihar Banddhu, the newspaper that chronicled the freedom struggle

Long before Independence, a little-known Hindi newspaper from Bihar was questioning British rule, debating women's education, scientific progress and economic policy.



Bihar Bandhu was a weekly Hindi newspaper started in 1872 by Madan Mohan Bhatta (Photo by Rahul Ranjan)

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The history of India's freedom struggle is often reconstructed through political movements, speeches by national leaders and official colonial records. But another history survives in the newspapers, journals and pamphlets that recorded contemporary debates far from the centres of imperial administration.

In Bihar, Bihar Bandhu, a weekly Hindi newspaper started in 1872 by Madan Mohan Bhatta, was one such publication. Its editorials from 1914 show a vernacular press engaging with subjects ranging from women's education and scientific advancement to economic progress. They also demonstrate how newspapers could move beyond reporting events to question the objectives of colonial rule and criticise government policy.

Questioning colonial rule through the vernacular press

On May 9, 1914, Bihar Bandhu reported opposition among the state's educated sections to the proposed Patna University scheme. The newspaper also drew attention to the influence of missionary colleges in the region and questioned whether the British government intends to promote the intellectual growth of the people of Bihar in the same way as it had done for Bengal.

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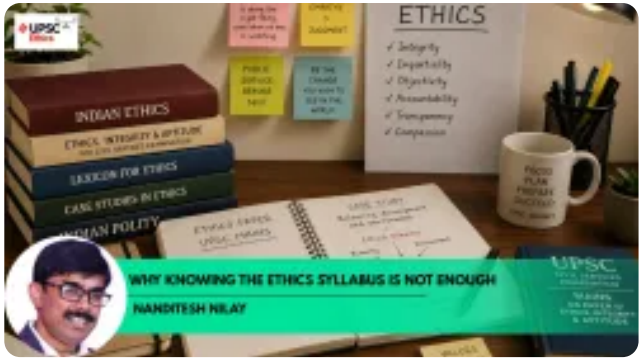

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Its criticism extended to the functioning of the British administration. An editorial argued that colonial governance in India was driven primarily by British interests rather than the development of Indians. “If Indians had been treated with justice in the Indian Council, why would there have been the Partition of Bengal?” it asked.

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The newspaper's criticism of colonial rule was also tied to questions of technology and education. Its editorials argued that institutions established under British rule were designed largely to meet the administrative requirements of the colonial state rather than contribute to wider development of Indian society. They questioned why institutions like engineering colleges were focused only on developing tools and systems that served colonial needs.

The newspaper also looked back at the Swadeshi movement, observing how it had inspired a sense of self-reliance and national consciousness among Indians. But it also noted that the initial enthusiasm had weakened and that its momentum could not be sustained in the years to come.

Science, education and Bihar's economic future

An editorial on May 16 the same year discussed how the indigo industry in Bihar and Bengal was severely affected by German scientific advancements, particularly the development of synthetic dyes. The newspaper criticised the state of education and technological development in India, arguing that it served primarily British interests rather than the needs of the people or the nation.

It also questioned what engineering colleges were producing for Indian society, complaining that students had failed to develop even basic technologies such as water pumps. It said that despite their scale and effort, these universities

produced very little of real value: “Our present-day universities are in many respects like mountains; when they are in labour, they bring forth only rats.”

The same issue also argued that the government was primarily focused on fulfilling its own objectives, even if it meant creating a class of people who would serve its administrative needs. “Government will do nothing except attaining its own objects by creating slaves for doing public work,” it said.

In this context, the newspaper urged people to make use of the financial resources available with zamindars and invest in scientific learning and innovation. Bihar, it argued, needed indigenous technologies, scientific education and local industries if it was to reduce its dependence on colonial structures.

Women’s education and cultural identity

An article published on May 23 argued that English and missionary education were being used as tools to influence the minds of young women, and that such education could distance girls from traditional and religious practices.

It suggested that the British government was using education as a means to promote their own cultural and religious ideas: “How the religious education has been stopped, association with missionary ladies encouraged, the formulae of the Christian religion widespread into the ears of the unwary girls day by day — what is their fault if they now turn enemies to their own country by becoming Christians.”

Through this, the newspaper highlighted what it saw as the cultural and political implications of colonial education policies, particularly in shaping the outlook of the younger generation.

Another article on June 13 discussed women's position within the traditional conception of the family and invoked the idea of the wife as ardhangini, or an equal half and partner of her husband, while objecting to the education of girls from Hindu families by Christian missionaries. The newspaper argued that the European system of education, with its outward display and practices, was not suitable for Indian conditions and cultural values. "We consider it very dangerous to make the Christian nuns of the Loretto House teachers of girls of the real Hindu families… European system of education with all its paraphernalia or outward show is not congenial to the climate of India," it said.

Such examples not only reveal the political, social, and cultural concerns of early twentieth-century Bihar but also open a wider space for rethinking the role of regional newspapers as active agents in shaping public opinion. The issues discussed — education, colonial policies, science, women's roles, and economic decline — reflect a vibrant intellectual engagement that challenges the idea of Bihar as a passive periphery in colonial discourse.

At the same time, it raises important questions that require further attention. How many such voices remain hidden due to the poor preservation of archival materials? To what extent can regional newspapers reshape our understanding of nationalism, resistance, and social change in colonial India? The task, therefore, extends beyond recovering Bihar Bandhu. Bihar's surviving newspapers and periodicals need systematic collection, digitisation and analysis.

This work should be seen as an invitation to historians, researchers, and scholars to engage with vernacular press sources and offer a glimpse of political and social arguments as they unfolded.

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